ACCOMPANIED, EMBRACED, HELD
JANUARY 22, 2005
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FOURTH PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
PSALM 139:1-12
MARK 1:14-20
JONAH 1:1-3, 3:1-5, 10

"Now the word of the Lord came to Jonah …, saying 'Go at once to Nineveh …. But Jonah set out to flee from the presence of the Lord." (Jonah 1:1,2)

An occupational hazard that comes with being a minister is that people are curious about how we made our vocational decision. I saw life-long friends at a High School and College reunion recently. Meeting people I hadn't seen in decades, the question came over and over: "Are you still a minister?"

Douglas John Hall, a name you have heard from this pulpit, is a Canadian Theologian and a good one. He has written a memoir about how he came to be a minister and a theologian. The title, significantly, is *Bound and Free*. I chuckled when I read his account of an event that happens to all of us in this business. On a flight to California he sat down beside a business man occupied with a file of important-looking papers with the IBM logo on them. Hall was pleased because it appeared that his seat mate would be busy and that he, Hall, would be gloriously free to read, nap, do nothing at all. But then the man initiated a conversation. Hall says that as a defensive maneuver he asked the man about his work. Finally the dreaded, inevitable question came: "And what do you do?"

"Now I must tell you," Hall writes, "that usually when this questions is put to me en route, I — well, I lie. I sometimes say I am a teacher of philosophy or literature, subjects about which I do know a little. I do not lie out of sheer perversity but because when you tell someone about your profession, if you are a minister, or anything like that, your partner in conversation immediately hides himself in pious talk." Or, I find, chooses the occasion either to debate or confess. Not long ago I glanced over to see what my seat mate was reading — a bad habit of mine, but I can't seem to resist the temptation. He was reading *Creation Science*, an anti-evolution newsletter and related materials. I turned away and tried everything I could think of to avoid the moment of truth when he asked the inevitable and I could no longer avoid the conversation and the disagreement which I knew would follow and which did. I avoid rather than lie ever since I heard Martin Marty tell the story of a friend on a flight to Taiwan whose seat mate asked the inevitable, "What do you do?" and who instead of saying, "I'm a

Lutheran minister" thought he would shut the conversation down with "I'm a neuro-surgeon." "How interesting" his seat mate responded, "so am I."

People are curious about how we decide to do what we do and underneath it, I believe, is an enduring interest in the matter of vocation, whether God has anything to do with it, whether God actually has an opinion, a desire for us, a will, and if so, how do we know it. It is the most important question any of us ever ask or answers. What to do with our lives; what to do with what's left of them? There is no more important question than that.

It used to be widely accepted that God calls men and women to religious professions, but pretty much leaves everyone else on their own when it comes to deciding what to do. It was Martin Luther and John Calvin who broadened the idea of vocation to apply to all. God calls people, clergy and non clergy alike, to play a role in God's kingdom. Some get to do it professionally but God calls all to a life of faithful service. And, God calls each person to a work: physicians, lawyers, scientists, laborers, police officers. Mothers tenderly nurturing their children and creating a home are doing God's work every bit as much as the priest or minister, Hall says.

He also observes that people who are called or summoned in the Bible more often than not "resist the call, refuse to hear it, or having heard it, wish they had not." (p.4)

And so consider three texts: the story of Jonah, the call of Jesus' first disciples, and as a kind of theological foundation, the lovely 139th Psalm with its astounding assertion that God pursues each one of us and that there is nowhere we can go that God does not come to meet us.

Jonah and the whale — it is one of the most fascinating and beloved stories in the Bible: Actually it's not a whale. It's a very big but unidentified fish. God summons Jonah: "I have a job for you to do. Go to Nineveh and warn the citizens to change their ways or they're in for a lot of trouble." Nineveh is the capital of Assyria. It's in Iraq today. The Assyrians were a powerful empire. They more or less ruled the whole area. Jews hated Assyrians. Nineveh is the last place a self-respecting Jew wants to go. Come to think of it, why is God so interested in Assyria? So Jonah boards the first ship out of town and heads in the opposite direction, as far away as you can go, to Tarshish, on the southwest coast of Spain, literally "the farthest reaches of the sea." Jonah, the text says, is not only fleeing from his unattractive assignment, he is also trying to get away from God.

A storm comes up. The crew has a fairly sophisticated theological discussion: the outsiders in this story, Phoenician sailors, people of Nineveh, King of Assyria are all better theologians and morally more

reliable than Jonah — the sailors throw Jonah overboard after determining that this is between God and Jonah. The storm subsides. A big fish swallows Jonah. Even there Jonah can't get away from God. So he prays from the belly of the fish: "I called to the Lord in my distress, and he answered me." A friend told me she used Jonah for a children's sermon once and asked the children a question — always a precarious venture, "what happened to Jonah in the belly of the fish?" A little boy responded: "He got digested."

Actually the fish spews Jonah out on dry land. God calls a second time. "Go to Nineveh." Jonah is not slow. This time he obeys, goes to Nineveh, issues the warning and sits back to watch the Ninevites receive their punishment. But the unexpected happens. From the King on down the Ninevites repent. God changes his mind and forgives. And Jonah sulks. "I knew something like that would happen." The story ends with God teaching Jonah some basic theology. God loves, cares for the people of Nineveh as much as God cares for the people of Jerusalem. It's a lesson in the "wideness of God's mercy," the universality of God's love. It is a lesson much of the world, much of the church, has yet to learn.

There's a lot going on in this story, but this morning I want to stay with the two ideas: that God has a job for Jonah to do, and second, that there is nowhere Jonah can go to get away from God even though he tries. God will not give up on Jonah. God will follow Jonah to the farthest limits of the sea," to the depths and darkness of the belly of the fish.

God has a job for each of us. It may be a job for which you are paid money. But it also may be a job outside the way you earn your living. God summons each one of us to faithfulness, to lives of generous and compassionate commitment. There is work for each of us to do. James Forbes calls it "our project." Each of us has a project: preaching sermons, healing people, establishing justice, passing laws, maintaining the city, writing the truth, defending the nation, nurturing, teaching, caring for the children, creating and maintaining a home, building a church. It may be public; it may be quiet and private, it may be a profession, it may be a volunteer job. But God has a project for each of us and there is no more important task in life than identifying it, acknowledging it, doing it, and thanking God for the great privilege and honor and blessing of it.

Jesus calls Simon and Andrew and they drop what they are doing and follow him. Sometimes it's that simple, you hear a voice, feel a tug on your heart, you turn around and follow. And sometimes it is a life-long struggle to follow and be faithful, a quiet, steady faithfulness that expresses itself in modest almost invisible ways.

God calls us and the journey of faith begins when deep in our hearts we say “yes.”

God did not give up on Jonah and abandon him to his flight from responsibility, his trying to hide from God. God follows Jonah across the ocean, into the depths, into the deep darkness. God summons again and again.

> “Where can I flee from your presence?” the Psalmist asked.
> “If I ascend to heaven, you are there.
> If I make by bed in She'ol you are there.
> If I take the wings of the morning
> and settle at the farthest limits of the sea
> even there your hand shall lead me
> and your right hand hold me fast.”

That is a very different image of God from the popular, prevailing picture of God as judge, primarily concerned with who’s keeping the rules and who is not. This is a God who cares so deeply none of us is ever abandoned, given up on, no matter where we go, what we have done, and where we have fled. There is nowhere we can go that God will not patiently, lovingly follow and be a comforting, reassuring, encouraging and sometimes challenging presence.

Eugene Kennedy, former Catholic priest and emeritus professor of philosophy at Loyola, wrote a piece for the *Perspective* section in last Sunday’s *Tribune.* He reflected on the Vatican’s recent announcement that Limbo has been down-graded as church doctrine.. Limbo, the church taught for centuries, is where un-baptized babies go when they die — not heaven, but not hell either. A place for waiting.

Kennedy says Limbo, even if it is no longer an official church doctrine, has significant metaphoric and spiritual meaning: that anybody who has ever waited, or felt abandoned, or alone — knows what Limbo is, “We have all been to limbo spiritually,” Kennedy wrote, “we are there right now in one way or another …. Every man or woman who has waited in one of the many limbos of life” . . . waiting for test results, waiting for a letter, a call, waiting for a promotion, waiting for the children to grow up, and the dog to die, waiting for meaning and excitement and passion, waiting for life to happen. Kennedy writes — “limbo is in hospitals . . . . when anxious people wait for the birth of a child or the death of a loved one . . . . every one knows what limbo is.”

Kennedy said that in the same week the church officially closed down limbo, a group of coal miners “spent their last hours in its murky counterpart deep in the earth of West Virginia.”

We were mesmerized by the story. Thirteen men caught, stranded, in the utter darkness of a coal mine. They didn't know where they were, that they were actually less than a mile from fresh air, and so they waited, and their families waited, in limbo. And I kept thinking, as I was reading about it, and watching on television, about what it must have been like for them. I kept thinking about Jonah, in the depths of the ocean, and the darkness of the fish's interior, and the amazing idea that God could find him even there. And I kept remembering the words of Psalm 139. .. . . "If I make by bed in She'ol, in hell, in limbo, you are there."

I grew up around railroads and coal and coal mines in the surrounding mountains in western Pennsylvania. I was always fascinated with the mines themselves, many of them visible from the road, some working mines, abandoned mines with warning signs, a forbidden admonition and therefore a temptation for young boys hiking in the woods to take a few steps inside, around the wooden barricade, and feel the sudden surprising cool dampness and then utter darkness. I was always fascinated with the men who went deep into the earth and worked all day down there on their hands and knees and emerged late in the afternoon, their faces absolutely black with coal dust except for the whiteness of their eyes under their goggles, blinking in the afternoon sun. I've always been respectful and fascinated with the utter darkness in a mine where for whatever reason the lights go out — and so I followed the incident with avid interest.

I kept remembering the verses in Psalm 139 that we read to patients critically ill, near the end, words which I would want to hear:

"If I say, "Surely the darkness
shall cover me,
and the light around me
become night,
even the darkness is not dark to you;
the night is as bright as the day,
for darkness is as light to you."(11,12)

I think those men knew those verses, had heard them in church many times — connected them to the depths and darkness they entered every working day of their lives, and then the day their lamps dimmed and the oxygen began to run out.

Eugene Kennedy wrote:

> “Huddled in the darkness they wrote simply by the light within themselves to reassure and to recommit themselves to those waiting for them in a different kind of limbo above ground.”

And so, incredibly, Martin Lober, Jr. found a piece of paper, an insurance form, and a pencil and “wrote a message from deep in limbo to his family and to all of us.”

> ‘Tell all I see them on the other side. . . . It wasn’t bad. I just went to sleep’
>
> “At the bottom he scrawled, ‘I love you.’”

It is the most astonishing idea, a truth you and I are invited to trust and bet our lives on. We are known and named and called by One who will never abandon us. There is nowhere we can go that God cannot find us. We are, in Marilyn McEntyre’s good words “accompanied, embraced and held.”

> Where can I flee from your spirit?
> If I ascend to heaven you are there
> If I make my bed in hell,
> If I am in limbo,
> you are there
> If darkness covers me — even the darkness is not dark to you
> If I take the wings of the morning
> and settle at the farthest limits of the sea
> even there your hand shall lead me
> and your right hand shall hold me fast.”

Amen.